

# (THE) BEE GEES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1963-2001</i>	<i>Pop Rock</i>	<i><a href="#">Mr. Natural</a> (1974)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *(The) Bee Gees*

Years: *1963-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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## SING AND PLAY 14 BARRY GIBB SONGS

Album released:

November 1965

V A L U E  
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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) I Was A Lover, A Leader Of Men; 2) I Don't Think It's Funny; 3) How Love Was True; 4) To Be Or Not To Be; 5) Timber; 6) Claustrophobia; 7) Could It Be; 8) And The Children Laughing; 9) Wine And Women; 10) Don't Say Goodbye; 11) Peace Of Mind; 12) Take Hold Of That Star; 13) You Wouldn't Know; 14) Follow The Wind.

### REVIEW

Because the Bee Gees decided to name their classic 1967 album **Bee Gees 1st** and not **Bee Gees 1st In The Land Where People Do Not Walk On Their Heads**, some people might still believe today that this was their debut album, and that the story of the Bee Gees begins with 'Turn Of The Century' and 'New York Mining Disaster 1941'. In reality, it does not take much to find out that the boys had at least two full-fledged LPs to their name in 1965–66; that before that, they had released their first official single on March 22, 1963; and that there are traces of their musical career going back to at least 1960, such as in this live TV performance of ['Time Is Passing By'](#). The only catch is, of course, that all of this took place strictly on Australian soil. Well, maybe there is an extra catch, too — even on Australian soil, nobody really gave that much of a damn. As legend has it, the Bee Gees learned that they finally had their first single there enter the Top 10 ('Spicks And Specks') while on the boat back to England, in hopes of rebooting their career on their native soil (Australia was never really the boys' homeland: Maurice and Robin were already 8 years old when the family relocated).



Released on Leedon Records in late 1965, the dryly-but-informatively titled **Barry Gibb & The Bee Gees Sing And Play 14 Barry Gibb Songs** already lets you deduce most of the promoted facts from the title + cover combination. We learn that the leader of the band is named Barry Gibb, but also that he is not the only important person in the band; his younger brothers are *almost* as important, because they all sing and play, but still he is a little bit more important because he writes his own songs, in fact, he has written no fewer than 14 of them all on his own. 14 is a more important number than might seem at first — as we all know, typical American pop LPs at the time had up to 12 numbers, while 14 was more relevant for UK releases, so this adds a subtle touch of extra class. The «**...and play...**» bit is, of course, seriously misleading since only Barry consistently plays rhythm guitar on these recordings, with Robin occasionally playing keyboards and harmonica and Maurice credited for a couple of lead guitar parts, with a large bunch of session musicians taking over the rest. But not entirely misleading — at the very least, all three brothers were real musicians since their early years, not just a bunch of pretty faces picked out of the crowd.

It almost goes without saying that if you are simply interested in the best that the early Sixties have to offer — and I do not blame you if you are, life just might be too short to waste it on sweeping corners — then you might as well genuinely believe that **Bee Gees' 1st** was the first and life before that was just a blur. But if you are actually interested in understanding the phenomenon of the Bee Gees, these early recordings provide far more insight than any biography you'd care to read or any interview you'd like to watch. Personally, I like to re-arrange these 14 songs back in chronological order, mixing them in with about 6 or 7 more A- and B-sides that ended up rejected, and then wallow in my mixed emotions on the progress of the Bee Gees as a creative team from the very last days of the pre-Beatlemania era to the glimmering dawn of the art-pop and psychedelic age. It's a highly educational journey.

My own problem with the Bee Gees, as I should probably state from the get-go, was never about perceiving them as a 100% commercial band, always putting fame and fortune (allegedly gained from honing their craft and polishing their hard-work ethics) before genuine artistry. After all, the absolute majority of commercially popular bands share similar values, and many of them succeed in monetizing real emotions — that's not something I would ever do, but it's hardly a crime, either. My problem with the Bee Gees is that, throughout their career, they did a pretty poor job of *concealing* that kind of life philosophy on their actual records. They always wanted to be big, and they evolved with the times in a constant struggle to remain big, and that struggle is written all over nearly everything that they did. Even their most «artistic» records, like **Odessa**, have an imprint of that — which just goes to show that 1969 *was* probably the best year in the history of popular music, with its colorful vibe infecting anybody and everybody — and even at their very best, the Gibb brothers were expert

musical leeches, latching on to other peoples' ideas and expertly polishing and re-packaging them rather than developing their own artistic identities. That's the big difference between them and such other examples of musical chameleons as, say, David Bowie, whose picking up on current trends in music never prevented *his* records from forming a wholesome musical portrait of his own personality.

Before I get carried away with even more abstractions and judgements, though, let us return to more firm ground and give a little factual backing to this perspective by quickly going through the Gibb brothers' earliest legacy, single by single — and *yes*, naturally we should remain aware at all times that these are songs written by inexperienced teenagers and that if you compare them, for instance, with stuff written by the Beatles when they were 18 years old, it is perfectly possible that the Gibbs might just come out on top (of course, the Beatles had no opportunity to professionally record their songs when they were 18 years old, so the competition would be technically unfair). But we also should remember that even the crap we write in our early pubescent stages still has our DNA all over it, and sometimes the future directions of a performer's career can at least partially be predicted based on his first tiny steps.

Anyway, the Bee Gees' very first single, as mentioned above, was released on March 22, 1963 (not included on the LP) and we even have [precious Australian TV footage](#) showing them lip-syncing to 'The Battle Of The Blue And Grey'. What exactly made young Barry go ahead and write a country-western tune from the perspective of a Confederate veteran ("*I picked a soldier dressed in blue and filled him full of lead*" probably won't make it to anybody's list of Top 100 Favorite Bee Gees Lines) is unclear, because it is difficult to imagine the relevance of references to Stonewall Jackson to Australian audiences; but I guess that the underlying idea was something like «if we want to write country-western, we have to go for that sweet, gritty authenticity!». It kind of backfires when you hear pretty tiny buck-toothed Maurice Gibb harmonize to "*Well, I'm an old man now and I'm born to win the race*", but the effort is still laudable — produced by local Australian skiffle and rock'n'roll pioneer Col Joye with his «Joy Boys» as the backing band, the fast backing track is indeed infused by a bit of that free-flowin' Aussie energy.

With the A-side thus targeted to all Australian fans of Old Dixie, the B-side, '[Three Kisses Of Love](#)', was much more clearly oriented at the teen market — a slightly sped-up and cutified take on the doo-wop genre the likes of which would soon become staple food for bands such as Herman's Hermits. It actually feels more innovative for 1963 than the cowboy sound of the A-side, but only as far as the «cutesy novelty» factor is concerned. It also feels strange to have it on the same record as the A-side, what with the target groups being so different, but I guess that was precisely the point and that precise point

never did work out — though it did provide the band with some sonic fodder background against which they could flash their smiles and look all charming-like on Australian TV. It also made #98 on the Australian charts, which may have given them a bit of money and a bit of confidence.

Forward to July 1963: ‘Timber!’ backed with ‘Take Hold Of That Star’. The A-side is a fast-paced pop song, influenced by Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers, that begins the Bee Gees’ life-long relationship with string arrangements (I guess they did have the budget for *that* at least) and also officially presents the first proper vocal hook on a Barry Gibb record, even if you probably won’t ever find a lumberjack hollering in the forest with *those* kinds of exuberant intonations. On the plus side, ‘Timber!’ shows that Barry already had a knack for working out interesting pathways for vocal melody flow, and the song feels perfectly adequate for the young band, certainly much more so than having them reminisce about imaginary conversations with Confederate generals. I even... kinda like it. At least, far more so than the B-side: ‘Take Hold Of That Star’, conversely, is a nod to the past — a slow, bland, boring doo-wop ballad that has «Teenage Idols Recreating Ten-Year Old Fashions» all over it. When it came to reimagining doo-wop, the Bee Gees were no Beatles, and they sure couldn’t land a ‘This Boy’ if their life depended on it.

‘Timber!’ was a relatively bigger success than ‘Battle’ (#75 on the charts), but it arrived right at the start of Beatlemania in Australia, when it became obvious that the Gibbs’ parents’ decision to relocate to the Southern hemisphere actually played a bad joke on their kids — by late 1963, the country was much more interested in proper UK exports to their country than their own «native» acts. Even Gerry and the frickin’ Pacemakers had a better chance of charting in the land of Oz than the Gibb brothers — and certainly not for lack of trying: ‘Peace Of Mind’, released in March 1964, was a clear attempt to be part of the British Invasion, with a bombastic Mersey beat, harmonies restructured to feel more like the Beatles, ringing electric guitars, rumbling McCartney-style bass, and even a stomping outro lifted directly from ‘Twist And Shout’. (The piano-led folk balladry of ‘Don’t Say Goodbye’ on the B-side was, however, still a 100% pastiche of the Everly Brothers).

Alas, ‘Peace Of Mind’ shared the same flaw with so many other clueless Beatles imitations — it had all the happiness, but none of the subtle tension and drama of classic bombastic Beatles singles. Then again, maybe even if it *had* the tension and the drama, Australian teens just weren’t interested in anything from their native soil at the time. If you look at their 25 biggest singles from 1964, the Beatles are holding 8 out of 25 spots, and the *only* Australian act is Billy Thorpe with his (actually not very good) cover of the Coasters’ ‘Poison Ivy’, so, technically, still an export from overseas. As far as the average consumer out there could tell, the Bee Gees were just a bunch of cute, but boring kids from his local TV network,

and, in all honesty, the average consumer wouldn't be too far off the mark. Barry Gibb was quickly learning how to imitate (without directly ripping off) the basic form of this new UK school of songwriting, but neither he nor his two younger siblings possessed the passionate spirit that stood behind the form and made it worthwhile in the first place. And now they did not even have the privilege that so many other lucky bands, also bereft of that same spirit, still had — the privilege to announce themselves as "*From London, England...*" or "*from Liverpool, England...*" or even "*from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England...*", for crying out loud. Sydney? Who the hell wants to hear a band from Sydney in 1964?

The 18-year old genius, Mr. Barry Gibb, was not willing to get the hint, though. 'Claustrophobia', released in August 1964, was as pseudo-Beatlesque as these guys ever got — well, admittedly that reverb-soaked lead guitar sounds far more like Hank Marvin of The Shadows than George Harrison of The Mop Tops, but those harmonies, even those quivering minimalistic moves along the line, are unmistakable. Again, though, they nail the cheerfulness but never ever the Lennon note of sarcasm and bitterness, and in the end it still comes out more like the Dave Clark Five than the real thing. Also, exactly how bizarre are these lyrics: "*I'd like to know how far you'd go to use those lips of wine / But I get claustrophobia 'cause there's too many boys on your mind*"? The first line kind of reads like something that Andy Kaufman's Foreign Man might read from one of his phrasebooks (and prepare to get slapped), and the second suggests immense joy at the option to use such a long word for the song's main vocal hook but a rather vague understanding of its general semantics. The B-side, 'Could It Be', is an equally brave and equally fatal attempt to cross-pollinate classic Buddy Holly with the harmonica attack of 'Please Please Me' — ingenious, but utterly artificial.

In desperation, perhaps, at the miserable fate of both of Barry's Merseybeat imitations on the charts, the Bee Gees decided to try their hand at a cover, immediately showing their true colors: Glen Campbell's 'Turn Around, Look At Me' was perhaps one of the most «anti-Merseybeat» choices they could come up with at the time. A bland, boring adult contemporary ballad, the original could at least be said to possess a modicum of charisma if one really loves Glen's singing — but the brothers replace that intimacy with three-part harmonies, tight and lilting, perhaps, but losing the only half-decent aspect of the tune. Worse, the B-side was 'Theme From [The Travels Of Jamie McPheeters](#)', inspired, I guess, by the brothers watching another of their preferred Western soap operas (given that the twins were only a couple years older than Kurt Russell in the title role, there may have been some fantasy self-identification issues), and sounding exactly like a country-western theme for 12-year olds should sound. If *this* had been their first single, I might have understood — but releasing it *after* the initial shockwave of the British Invasion makes me suspect that poor Barry must have been stocking impressive amounts of whiskey and gin under his bedcovers to help him whittle away the nights of gloom and desperation, temporarily leaving the

battlefield to let his younger siblings take over. It's a good thing he came back to his senses before they had the chance to tap too much into re-runs of *Lassie* and *Leave It To Beaver*. (The single was not included on the LP for the obvious reason that neither of the two songs was written by Barry Gibb).

Anyway, the Bee Gees started 1965 with another cover — this time, of Arthur Alexander's 'Every Day I Have To Cry', which is a much better song than Glen Campbell's puddle of goo, but gains absolutely nothing in this version. More attractive is the B-side, the last and arguably the best of Barry's straightahead imitations of Mersey-style pop-rock: 'You Wouldn't Know' has a good deal of choppy crunch, a decisive little descending electric riff at the end of each chorus, and a strangely rich bedrock of humming ambience and proto-psychedelic vocals that add more depth to the sound than there ever has been before — here, at last, we see the first tiny seeds of the sound that would ultimately flourish on **1st**, where a song like this would not be totally out of place.

However, it *was* 1965, and popular tastes that year were dictated by Dylan going electric and The Byrds showing the way, meaning that it would not take too long before we'd see the Bee Gees once again shifting their style toward current trends. 'Wine And Women', released in September of that year, is a bombastic folk waltz, though its large, looming sound is created almost exclusively by acoustic guitars and a *very* oddly produced string section adding a monotonous, hallucinatory hum in the background (I would almost have thought of the sound as a synthesizer, but we're talking 1965 here). This new sound was, in large part, due to the arrival of Bill Shepherd, who produced the record and would then remain with the band as the arranger of their orchestration for quite a long time. Melodically, 'Wine And Women' is no big deal (it doesn't really make much of a point about anything), but it did show the way to something grand. Meanwhile, the B-side, called 'Follow The Wind' ('Catch The Wind' + 'I'll Follow The Sun' = 'Follow The Wind', get it?), is a gently-laughably derivative ballad that sounds much more like Peter, Paul, & Mary or The Seekers than either the Beatles or Donovan, but its historical importance is that it gives Robin Gibb his very first lead vocal in Bee Gees history. (Yes, that's right, folks, we got the exact moment of the Miraculous Birth Of The Incredible Helium Goat pinned down here, so step right up!).

The last single of 1965, recorded at the same time with the actual making of the **14 Barry Gibb Songs** LP, was predictably used to open the LP itself. 'I Was A Lover, A Leader Of Men' is also taken at a waltz tempo, and both subject-wise and mood-wise feels like a sequel to 'Wine And Women' — quite natural, given that 'Wine And Women' managed to become their biggest chart success so far (#19 on the Australian charts) and they were obviously eager to follow it up with something stylistically similar. Usually such things fail, and this time was no exception: 'Lover' only made it as high as #85,



which is a pity, because it shows some progress and, overall, is a better song. This time around, there is a deep, rumbling bass bottom, the harmonies soar in early psychedelic fashion, the lyrics are grammatically more coherent, there's a cool fuzzy guitar break, and a strange ten-second long mournful coda that comes out of nowhere and disappears back in the same direction. *This* song would *definitely* fit on **1st**, though in two years' time the brothers would advance to an even higher level of sophistication overall. But it might have been too much for Australian audiences at the time. By contrast, the B-side, 'And The Children Laughing', is such an obvious Dylan / Byrds rip-off that it is impossible to take its «angry» vibe of social protest seriously.

Of the three remaining LP-only numbers, 'How Love Was True' is a tremolo-laden corny ballad that might have worked better in 1963 than 1965; 'I Don't Think It's Funny' is a decent, but excessively sentimental Robin serenade that is once again based on some Peter, Paul & Mary chords; and 'To Be Or Not To Be', despite probably having the dubious honor of being the first rock'n'roll song to directly appropriate Shakespeare, is the first out of several clear-cut examples of why the Bee Gees should never, ever, *ever* try to perform a straightahead rock'n'roll song, as their capacity to deliver authentic rock'n'roll energy ranks about the same as the capacity of a fish to breathe fresh air (if you never saw their totally and utterly godawful performance with Chuck Berry on 1973's *Midnight Special*, this is *not* an official invitation to remedy this sad gap in your musical education). Fortunately for all of us, they very rarely tried.

So is there any reason to listen to this collection today *beyond* pure historical interest? I would say no, probably — but then, don't knock historical interest. It is not every day, really, that you get to become acquainted with the formative history of a great musical act (and yes, for all of my criticism, the Bee Gees *would* achieve a certain level of greatness) in such detail, starting almost from early childhood that began in the last years of one musical epoch and then went through the first and most turbulent years of another. David Bowie springs to mind, but his career began with the onset of Beatlemania, not prior to it — which makes all the difference in the world. And if you ever asked yourself the question, «How could the exact same band go from 'Every Christian Lion Hearted Man Will Show You' to 'Night Fever'?», well, I'd say that adding 'The Battle Of The Blue And The Grey' as the first part of that trilogy might actually provide extra insight into the issue.

